

“TEN VITAL VERSES: A Fruitful Life”

Psalm 1 and Galatians 5:16-23

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Psalm 1 invites us to think about two paths—the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. While perhaps being overly simplistic with this dualistic understanding of life, the psalm does remind us that we have choices.

And the imagery of the vibrant tree planted by streams of water is good for us today as we enter into this season known as Ordinary Time, that we sometimes think of as “Growing Time.” Our banner series with a seed growing into the ground, with hope that something will grow.

If we want a tree to grow, it needs good roots and water and sunshine. It needs to be well planted and well cared for.

The same is true for us. If we want to be healthy as God’s people, we need to be well planted and well cared for. We need our roots to go down into good soil, healthy soil.

We need to plant ourselves in God’s word, to grow strong roots, to live healthy and good lives.

Syngman Rhee, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church, spoke regularly about the connection between the roots of our faith and the fruits of our faith.

Today we focus on roots and fruits, as we begin a ten week series called “Ten Vital Verses” where we are looking at ten inspirational Bible verses.

Psalm 1 invites us into our Ten Vital Verses series, as we recognize that we need strong roots in God’s word, and it connects with the imagery in our first Vital Verse, about growing fruit.

Our first Vital Verse is known as the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5, and it is really two verses. (I’m breaking the rules on the first week!) Paul wrote this letter to the church at Galatia, in modern day Turkey because the people began to forget their calling and their identity, because some leaders were teaching about religious restrictions.

Paul wrote to tell them about freedom, the disciplined freedom of being a Christian.

He framed his argument with overly simple duality: Desires of the flesh and Life in the spirit.

It's interesting to note that the most of 15 "works of the flesh" are social in nature, involving how we interact with other people.

As you may know most of the New Testament was written in Greek, and there are a variety of ways of translating any sentence.

In verse 16 of the NRSV, we read a commandment:

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

In verse 16 according to the NIV, we read a promise

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

One other interesting note before I read. In my weekly email CONNECTIONS, I wrote about using our technology wisely and well. I've recently been getting a Bible verse every day at 8:00am. Today's verse for me and I believe everyone else with this app, was Galatians 5.16

Listen for God's word

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us. Amen.

I like apples. I grew up in a house where we had an apple tree in the front yard and the back yard. My mom used to make apple sauce every year. And my brothers and I enjoyed throwing the apples into the stream behind our house.

I enjoy all kinds of apples, but I think my favorite kind is Fuji. I eat one just about every day.

Sometimes when I eat them, I get annoyed at the seeds. If I take too big a bite, or if I don't cut the apple just right, I end up with a seed in my mouth.

But rather than being annoyed by the seed, I think I should be amazed.

From one little seed, if it's planted well and cared for, can come a whole new apple tree, producing hundreds, even thousands of apples.

And each of those apples has seeds to generate even more good fruit.

All fruit has seeds, and when it is well planted and well cared for, from those tiny little seeds, wonderful, delicious things happen.

So, Paul uses this imagery of fruit to talk about life as a Christian, life in the Spirit of the living God.

As we plant ourselves in God's word,

as we sing and pray and study and learn

We let God's word take root, and eventually comes the fruit.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

Gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control

This is not the only way the Bible portrays a well-rooted and spirit filled life. Elsewhere we hear the call for justice and righteousness loud and clear.

Jesus began his ministry saying "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." (Luke 4)

In 1 Cor 12, Paul writes about the living by the spirit, saying the church is one body with many parts, called to serve the common good.

In Roman 12, Paul writes about the call to be transformed, and to live a new life—weeping with those who weep, rejoicing with those who rejoice, persevering in prayer, and overcoming evil with good.

Our focus today is on the fruit of the spirit in Galatians 5.

I've seen churches that have nine-week sermon series on each of the fruits. We're not going to do that. But I do want to point out that the first one is love.

Love is at the core of our faith. God loves us and calls us to love each other. Love is at the core of our identity here at Covenant. We gather to learn about God loving us and we go to live with God's love in the world, making a difference.

And the other interesting thing about the list of nine is that self-control is last, sort of tying things together by reminding us to be strong against temptation and distraction, to make good choices and avoid the way of the wicked, as Psalm 1 reminds us.

Years ago, I learned about the fruit of the Spirit, and I was helped by someone noticing the syllable. The first three have one, the second three have two, and the final three have three.

Love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, goodness,
Gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control

But then newer translations like the NRSV replaces "goodness" with "generosity" so that defeats the 1-2-3 model.

We have a pitcher with eight glasses. The pitcher says "The fruit of the Spirit is love..." As people sit down for dinner, they each get a glass, with joy, peace, patience or one of the other fruits of the Spirit on it. I let them decide if the word on their glass is a gift they already have or something they need to ask God to grow in their lives.

As we ponder this Vital Verse today, perhaps there is one of these nine that jumps out at you.

Maybe you need to pray

Dear God, give me patience

Loving God, help me with self-control

Merciful God, let your kindness grow in my heart and life

As you entered worship, hopefully you received a small blank card. If not, we have more in the rear of the sanctuary.

There are a few choices for how you could use this card.

Maybe you need to write down one of the fruit from our verse today, and pray that good would grow that fruit in you.

Maybe you need to write down the whole verse, and pray for God to make your life more fruitful.

Maybe you want to hang onto the card and write down a different vital verse, something from the word of God that needs to be a firm foundation in your life.

Thirty-five years ago, in my first year of college, I was given sixteen Bible cards. Several of them have become vital verses to me.

- Acts 1.8—You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes
- Matthew 4.19—Jesus said Come follow me and I will make you fish for people.

Over the years, I've come to rely on God's word as my firm foundation.

My hope is that God's word will continue to take stronger root in me and in all of us, so that good fruit can abound, in our homes, our church, and especially in our world.

So as you enjoy your apples, and watermelon, and strawberries, and peaches this summer, I encourage you to pray for yourself, that you would welcome the spirit of God to teach you, comfort you, and strengthen you, so you can live a fruitful life.